

Deteriorating infrastructural facilities in our universities

This is to congratulate the editor (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 77, 205–206) for drawing our attention to the scheme of the Royal Society for creating a Scientific Relief Fund as advertised in *Nature*, 6 May 1999. In our country, scientists in the Central Government (including CSIR, DRDO, etc.) institutions have been under the pension scheme from the beginning. By contrast, teachers particularly in the State Universities had the assurance of a Provident Fund (PF), which was sufficiently attractive until the rate of inflation became too steep. In fact, in a Central University like Delhi, almost all the teachers had preferred the PF over the pension scheme. The situation changed drastically from around 1980 when the pension scheme was made more attractive particularly for Government employees by making provisions for dearness allowance/adjustment(s), etc. Naturally, teachers of Central Universities/Funded Institutions changed their option to the pension scheme. Fortunately, on the recommendation of the 1986 (Mehrotra) Committee, the pension scheme has been extended to teachers of a much larger chunk of the State Universities also, but the arbitrary (1986 or even later) date(s) of implementation ignored (except in a few UP universities like Allahabad where the persistent efforts of this author could rectify the situation) a large number of

senior teachers who had retired earlier. The plight of such teachers (incidentally dwindling in number) deserves some special attention.

Coming to the specific issue of 'Supporting retired scientists' on which the Editorial has focused attention following the Royal Society advertisement about the Relief Fund, the suggestions made are certainly worthy of consideration and early implementation. However, attention has to be drawn towards the fast disappearing infra structural (laboratory/library) facilities. In most of the institutions of higher learning, these have deteriorated steeply since 1986, as the portion of the institutional budget left after defraying the higher salary component, is becoming utterly inadequate (particularly in view of the steeply rising cost of most commodities). The laboratory/library facilities in major state-financed institutions have dipped down to 19th century standards (no exaggeration). All the educational institutions are now being urged to raise their own resources. The symbiotic effect of teaching and research at the tertiary level is too well recognized to be mentioned here. In this depressing environment, the students and teachers tend to derive the maximum selfish advantage from an outmoded traditional evaluation pattern. This leads to teaching shops and neglect of the regular

institutional learning/teaching process, finally resulting in indiscipline at all levels. The brilliant students and devoted teachers are the worst sufferers in this scenario. The only organization (UGC) constituted for maintenance of standards has been able to do precious little, except doling out petty grants under its own budgetary cuts; it does not care to pay any heed to the suggestions of even such experienced teacher(s) whom it considers worthy of heading the pay-commission(s), etc. with the added responsibility of making recommendations which could facilitate the process of attracting and retaining the best talents to the 'noble' (?) teaching profession. The politicians and administrators are too self-oriented and short-sighted to pay any attention to this deterioration with 'long time' adverse effects. Under the circumstances, it is only the gifted students and devoted teachers who continue to remain our only hope for the rejuvenative process to begin before it becomes too late! We should be really grateful to the Academy for drawing our attention to such challenges!

R. C. MEHROTRA

*Department of Chemistry,
University of Rajasthan,
Jaipur 302 004, India*

Pointless participation and pointless protests

The letter 'Restriction on participation in meetings' (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 77, 208–209) bemoans the denial of permission to T. Jayaraman to participate in the round table discussion in the Atlanta Centennial Meeting of the American Physical Society. The purported purpose of this round table discussion was 'to identify the role of physicists to build bridges between nations which otherwise may be having conflicting interests on nuclear issues or issues related to physics'. The letter criticizes the Direc-

tor of the Institute of Mathematical Sciences in Chennai for having denied permission to Jayaraman, and adds 'the denial of leave to Jayaraman to participate in the panel discussion is a violation of his academic freedom and has done disservice to the cause of promoting international peace'.

One is hard-pressed to understand either the purpose of the panel discussion or the purpose of the protest. In the letter, the signatories say that 'bringing together scientists from the two sides

(India and Pakistan) to discuss the situation and alleviate tensions was, in our opinion, an eminently sane and rational course of action'. It is not clear just how the proposed panel discussion would 'alleviate tensions'. Are the participants in the discussion in any position to influence national policy in either country? While it can be argued that well-intentioned peace-loving people in India may eventually bring the Indian government around to their way of thinking, it is eminently clear from

the past fifty years of history that the Pakistani government and the Pakistani army are accountable to no one, not to the people of Pakistan and certainly not to a set of physicists.

The hypocrisy of the signatories is clear when one considers that the same persons were studiously silent when the US government denied a visa to R. Chidambaram, the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, to attend a scientific meeting in USA. Such selective indignation cannot but cast doubts on the motives of the signatories. As for tensions, are India and Pakistan the only two countries in a state of conflict at present? Why do not these do-gooders try and organize such panel discussions about the stalled Palestinian peace process, or the continued barbaric treatment of Iraqi citizens by way of never-ending sanctions, all allegedly to protect them from their supposedly despotic leader? It is hard to escape the suspicion that the panel discussion was organized not so much with any real hope of 'alleviating tensions' but merely to draw attention to the participants and to keep their peace-mongering credentials in good orders with the powers that be. Otherwise it is obvious even to a child that physicists, *per se*, have no role at all to play in alleviating tensions be-

tween India and Pakistan. The recent intrusions into the Kargil area by Pakistani troops masquerading as 'mujahideen' should dispel any doubts on this point.

Also, it is not clear just how Jayaraman's academic freedom was violated by his having been denied permission to attend the meeting in Atlanta. Presumably, academic freedom refers to freedom to pursue one's academic activities without hindrance. It is necessary to distinguish between attending a meeting to present one's research findings or some such academic activity vs attending a policy-oriented (publicity-oriented?) panel discussion on a topic far removed from one's academic specialization. In what capacity would Jayaraman have attended the meeting? Was it in his individual capacity? As a faculty member of Matscience? As a representative of Indian foreign policy? Clearly it is not the third, so it comes down to either the first or the second. If the first, we would argue that anyone who is an employee of Matscience can never pretend to be acting in his individual capacity. Whether we like it or not, so long as we continue to be employees of our respective organizations, whatever we say will be interpreted as reflecting, at least in part, the official

position of our employers. The only way for some-one to say and do what he feels is to quit one's employment – not otherwise. So long as Jayaraman is a faculty member of Matscience, he is subject to the decisions taken by the Director. Ill-informed and ill-motivated criticisms of the Director's decision from self-righteous and far-flung groups of persons should be dismissed with the contempt they deserve.

Finally, it is not clear to us why *Current Science* is getting entangled with an issue that is neither current nor scientific. When all the ideological garb is stripped away, all that remains is a difference of opinion between Jayaraman and his Director. Surely, there are hundreds of scientists in our country who sometimes disagree with the decisions of their Director. We would hate to see *Current Science* degenerate into a forum where petty personal squabbles are pursued.

M. VIDYASAGAR*
RAJEEVA KARANDIKAR†

*E9, DRDO Township,
Bangalore 560 093, India
†Indian Statistical Institute,
New Delhi 110 016, India

Debating Pokharan-II

Publication of a statement signed by some physicists along with Editors' note (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 77, 208) does not make it clear whether it has been published on the request of the signatories or solely at the Editors' initiative. Recalling the coverage of Pokharan-II event in *Nature* (UK) resembling a tabloid report, is *Current Science* on a campaign trial against India's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons following western opinion? It is indeed very unfortunate that Indian intelligentsia and elites excel in selling national interest for petty gains, and accolades emanating from the West.

Dissent is most welcome, and state policy is not necessarily representative of national interest. A serious effort to understand strategic aspects, R&D

aimed at defence, and long-term impacts of high-tech warfare should have been undertaken by concerned scientists, and scientific associations; which has sadly not been done. Moreover, this has to be done with responsibility, keeping national interest in mind. To campaign actively against nuclear policy of India, and at the same time enjoying privileges and facilities at a publicly-funded institution is unethical, and to justify it invoking 'academic freedom' is hypocrisy. Director of IMSc deserves support for performing his duty, and he is morally right.

I wish to comment on the assertion in the statement that 'We feel the present age compels us to think in global ... international peace'. To think global is fine but any physical activity is

constrained to localized space-time. It is not a compulsion of 'the present age', but enlightened perception of ancient Indian seers to think of the universe as one, and identify it with one-self. Only then, one is able to recite peace hymns of vedas, not just for international peace, but for universal peace. As regards 'academic freedom', the panel discussion was definitely not on a subject of physics, and had political and social aspects. Pursuit of knowledge naturally elevates one to freedom; and gradually one becomes least dependent on society. Only such a person can claim to be a 'world-citizen', and free to express his views irrespective of social or national boundaries. However, a person working for defence research or selling intellect for money doing re-